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SPECIAL ECONOMIC, HUMANITARIAN AND DISASTER RELIEF ASSISTANCE

Statement submitted by the International Federation of Red
Cross and Red Crescent Societies, a non-governmental
organization in consultative status with the Economic and
Social Council, category I

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is
circulated in accordance with paragraphs 23 and 24 of Economic and Social
Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

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DISASTERS AND HUMANITARIAN VALUES

Humanitarian action in a global village

The humanitarian gap

The number of people suffering in disasters is increasing. There may be occasional annual dips, but the trend is inexorably upward. The number of people living in poverty - on the brink of losing their livelihoods or their very lives - is continually rising as well.

As an agency very much involved with responding to the human need thrust suddenly upon us by disaster, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is greatly concerned by these ever-increasing numbers. What is of even greater concern is the fact that the gap between that which needs to be done and that for which we have the resources is growing. In the last five years IFRC spending on disaster response has risen from under 100 million to over 250 million Swiss francs per year but the needs to be met have risen at a much greater rate. Be it the sharecropper in the Caribbean, the landless labourer in Bangladesh, the villager in China or the farmer in southern Africa, the destitution he or she suffers after disaster - if he or she is still alive - multiplies on a scale no single agency or country can hope to meet.

Today more than ever before, the necessity exists of seeing humanitarian needs as common concerns, not as local or national problems. Like human dignity and hope, the right to give to and receive from, one's fellow men compassion and commitment and when disaster strikes the assistance needed to overcome that disaster shall be considered a universally shared value. This universality, which links people to people regardless of nation, is one of the fundamental principles of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and a principle that the movement would gladly see extended to all who suffer in disaster or are in a position to respond to such suffering.

Disaster preparedness and rehabilitation

Not only does the scale of disaster today necessitate universal concern, but it simply cannot be tackled in a reactive fashion. Disasters are not inevitable. There can be no disaster without vulnerable people. This axiom applies as aptly to the so-called natural disasters such as earthquakes as to the more complex disasters such as famine and human conflict. Over the past two years there has been a great deal of international attention concentrated upon disaster relief and emergency response-assistance after the act. While applauding this increased concern for the plight of the disaster victim IFRC wishes to remind the disaster response community that where communities and agencies have invested in preparedness measures, or where organizations have had the courage to confront the root causes of vulnerability to disaster and attempted to prevent its occurrence in the first place, the effect of disaster is greatly reduced. Even in disaster relief a much more long-term perspective is called for.

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All relief has either a positive or a negative effect on the future vulnerability of those who survive. All disaster relief is inevitably linked to rehabilitation. High-profile emergency relief may be necessary, but it is not sufficient. International agencies and Governments acting in international assistance must invest in disaster preparedness and be willing to invest in rehabilitation if they are to reduce the occurrence of disaster and see their relief programmes provide meaningful and sustainable solutions.

The freedom to act across the world, to save lives and livelihoods, must be balanced by a responsibility to invest in reducing the future likelihood of disaster. Agencies responding to disaster must not be seduced by the high profile and rapid impact of disaster relief.

IFRC believes that investment in disaster preparedness must be carried out within the disaster-prone community - not just among the international response agencies. Just as people are vulnerable to disasters, so have they capacities to withstand them. Investment in those capacities is the very meat of preparedness and rehabilitation. Households, communities, indigenous organizations and local Government are the front-line troops in the battle against disaster. It is here that we must be willing to invest.

Investing in disaster preparedness will help reduce the long-term occurrence of disaster, but will not eliminate it. When disaster strikes, there is still a need for rapid and appropriate assistance - often international assistance will be appropriate; but with such assistance comes a host of new problems, prime among them being the problem of aid coordination.

Relief aid coordination

Within the continuum of action, from preparedness to rehabilitation, the International Federation and its national societies have a particular interest in helping to improve the level of coordination of relief aid, especially within the non-governmental organization sector.

In this context, IFRC is seeking to provide a service that will enhance the effectiveness of non-governmental organization relief to disaster victims and be of value to both the non-governmental organization, and the donor and host government community. Such a service is needed because the number and diversity of international and national non-governmental organizations becoming involved in disaster relief are on the increase. In the mid-1980s over 150 non-governmental organizations were involved in disaster relief in the Sudan. Those ranged from organizations operating budgets comparable in size to those of agencies of the United Nations system to "one-man shows". In Armenia in 1989, in response to the earthquakes, some 500 people in 22 teams arrived in the first few days to assist in search and rescue. In Turkey in 1991, at least 44 non-governmental organizations not previously seen in the country gave assistance to the refugees leaving Iraq.

This plethora of diverse agencies, variously equipped and skilled, has led in the past to the inefficient use of relief resources and personnel. Lack of clarity over relief needs leads to inappropriate items' being supplied. On the ground, the less public and more difficult areas of assistance may be neglected as agencies unwittingly gravitate to the media's high ground. The slowness with which agencies come forward to provide for sanitation needs in refugee camps is a prime example of this.

For many Governments faced with a sudden influx of foreign relief workers, the non-governmental organization phenomenon is a perplexing one. Are these organizations to be treated like donor Governments or as agencies of the United Nations system? Who do the non-governmental organizations represent? By what right are they offering assistance? How does a Government create a mechanism for dealing with such a diverse collection of organizations? Many Governments find themselves confronted with these management issues at the same time that they are trying to deal with the crisis of the disaster that has struck their country.

For donor Governments trying to ensure that their aid is effectively targeted, conflicting and incomplete pictures of relief needs and uncertainty over the capacities of the organizations on the ground to deliver often lead to hesitation in resource commitment.

At the national level, poor coordination of relief efforts often stems from a lack of understanding of (a) actual needs that have to be met, (b) potential resources and capacities for meeting those needs and finally, (c) the organizational framework within which relief actions must be carried out. These uncertainties occur both within the non-governmental organization community and between them and the host Government and its institutions.

International-level coordination stems from a clear understanding of what is happening at the national level of the affected country complemented by a similar clarity on the part of donor countries. So, national-level coordination must be tackled before international-level coordination.

The key to action in this area is information quality. No non-governmental organization is going to let another direct its operations - nor should it - but if all non-governmental organizations work from the same agreed needs assessment, know each other's capacities on the ground, are aware of the organizational framework within which they must work, and know how the relief operation is progressing, they are more likely to work in a coherent manner.

The International Federation is taking the initiative to help facilitate non-governmental organization relief coordination. Through the provision of suitably trained and equipped delegates to national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, IFRC aims to provide the following four forms of assistance:

(a) Pre-disaster preparedness assistance to prepare for a possible coordination role, including the provision of training and communications equipment where appropriate;

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(b) Assistance in times of disaster to carry out timely needs assessments and formulate effective relief action plans;

(c) Provision of specifically allocated and suitably equipped international personnel, in times of disaster, to assist national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in the critical work of gathering, analysing and sharing information pertinent to the disaster, within the responding non-governmental organization community, with a view to providing a common basis of understanding from which cooperation and coordination can grow;

(d) Assistance to national societies to develop the potential to act as a facilitator between the non-governmental organization community and the host Government, if so requested.

IFRC is not claiming a monopoly on improving relief coordination and indeed the implementation of such an initiative will require close cooperation with the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and other coordinating bodies. In some countries it will be more appropriate for other indigenous non-governmental organizations to take the lead, but where a national society is asked to assist we are now committed to backing that assistance with human and financial resources.

Affirming humanitarian values

Today more than ever, disasters are not natural occurrences or acts of God. They are complex developments where the forces of nature, economics, environmental stress and politics interact to destroy families and communities. More than ever before we need to reaffirm that the offering and provision of assistance to the disaster victim is an act of common, universally shared humanity. It is not partisan; it is not political. It is an act that we, as relief agencies, have the privilege to carry out on behalf of all humanity. Nor should the willingness to receive assistance be seen as anything other than an openness to compassion. All agencies that are involved in disaster response must safeguard this principle of universal humanity. The disaster response community must strive to open up the channels between the disaster victim and relief aid. Moreover, we must jealously guard those channels against their misuse for narrow political gain.

In affirming such a principle, IFRC recognizes that as non-governmental or international agencies we cannot act alone. We need in every country, the help of Governments and controlling forces to enable assistance to be delivered and futures rebuilt. At the very least there is a need to be confident that the flow of legitimate aid to disaster victims will not be deliberately impeded.

Today we are offered an opportunity as never before. With the ending of the cold war and the increased willingness to invest in international institutions, disaster response can be tackled with increased vigour. If we have the will to think in a universal, non-partisan manner, then today we have the opportunity to turn such thought into action.
